

Informal Talk with the Monastic Community

On Spiritual Paternity

What can Catholic Philosophy Contribute to the Theme of Spiritual Paternity?

"[N]o one is father as God is Father."¹ In this striking statement of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we are brought into the mystery of the Primary Paternity of God.

Catholic philosophers understand the primary paternity of God the Father to be the highest form of fatherhood. It is spiritual. To the extent that men participate in the spiritual dynamics of fatherhood, they radiate a kind of spiritual paternity which tends to protect and provide for the persons they are guiding. For this reason spiritual paternity is the mature flourishing of a religious life which overflows in collaboration with the generativity of God the Father and is expressed uniquely in each man as his kind of genius in human relations of work, teaching, prayer and so on. It is the ever generating fruition of 'ora et labora'.

I turn now to briefly describe some of the insights of Catholic philosophers about paternity and especially spiritual paternity.

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274)

A metaphysical approach. God, the Father is Pure Act.

According to St. Thomas there three essential characteristics of God's Primary Paternity.² He is **First Principle**, He is **Unbegotten**, and He is **Eternally Begetting**. God, The Father is **First Principle** because He is the One from whom the Son Proceeds.³ God, the Father is

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #239

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, q. 89-91.

³ God the Father, who is self giving Truth, Goodness, and Love pours Himself forth into the Son, Who is the perfect image of the Father. The First Principle is the origin from which another comes. The First Principle is also the One to Whom the Son returns after He ascended to Heaven.

Unbegotten because he does not emanate from any Divine Person: rather, He is the origin of the Second and Third Divine Persons. "It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds... The divine Unity is Triune."⁴ We believe in faith that God not only ~~God~~^{the Father} receives the Son, but also all those whom the Son gathers, all those with whom He shares His glory. We come from the Father, and we return to the Father.

Now obviously the spiritual fatherhood of a monk is both different from the paternity of God the Father. Human fatherhood is begotten, a derived principal, and contingently begetting. Yet the similarities provide a rich analogy a descending order of three level; Divine Paternity, spiritual paternity of men, biological paternity of men.

Saint Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

Saint Hildegard, a Benedictine Abbess in the twelfth century, was the first Christian philosopher to attempt to identify essential characterises of human fathers. She reflected on the relationship between a chemical and biological aspect of the human being, using the medieval categories of humours and elements, to distinguish four different kinds of men who had four different kinds of children, and four different kinds of relations with women. Analysing the type of blood, colour of skin, fertility, and character of the men, she concluded that the best human father was the moderate, balanced man who also had honourable and fruitful relations with women. This second type of man was balanced, she argued, because of the presence of the

⁴ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes this interior dynamic of the Holy Trinity in paragraphs #232-267. As the Lateran Council discerned the Divine Persons in the Holy Trinity are distinguished by relations of origin: God is one but not solitary. 'Father,' 'Son' 'Holy Spirit'... are distinct from one another in their relations of origin" [Lateran Council IV (1215): DS 528] ", #254

"female element" air which moderated his male elements of fire and earth. In her complement analysis of four types of women, the second type she called "masculine" because of her character which tended towards efficiency. These are very crude, but interesting, attempts to begin a philosophy of sex and gender differentiation. So we can be grateful to Hildegard for recognizing that there is an identity of the personality which is deeper than our bio-chemical identity but which depends upon it for its expression.

Saint Edith Stein (Sr. Benedicta of the Cross) (1891-1942)

Saint Edith Stein, lived in the earlier part of our century, and died, as most of you probably know in Auschwitz in 1942. Using a phenomenological method to reach the intuited essence of man's and woman's identity, Blessed Edith delved deeply into how the male body effects a man's consciousness and how the female body affects a woman's consciousness, at the same time she also opened up the whole question of a divine call of a man or a woman to a particular vocation. This Divine Call is captured in the passage from Jeremiah for instance where we hear: "The word of Yahweh came to me, saying: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you; and appointed you as prophet to the nations.'" (Jer. 1: 4-6). In a similar way we can reflect on the fact that Abraham was called to be the father of Isaac and Ishmael and that St. Joseph was called to be the adoptive father of Jesus.

While we might find some of Edith Stein's particular conclusions a little too stereotyped, and even disagree with some of the particulars of her conclusions, what she attempted to do was extremely important for Catholic philosophy. Her probing of the implications of being engendered reached from the depths of our bio-chemical somatic structure to the heights of our personal and intimate relation with God who news us before we were ever generated by our

parents. Let us briefly consider some of her conclusions here.

Saint Edith Stein thought that the corporeal structure of the male body naturally orients a man towards a paternal manner of generating by detachment from the self. This follows the Aristotelian dictum that the male generates outside the self, and the female generates within the self. As a result she suggests that a male is not very affected by the lived experience of the body, and he tends to receive values in the world through his intellect, judges the values of things or persons in the world in a compartmentalized way, and uses his will to make efficient and specialized choices. This tendency in a man's psyche can lead him to negative qualities of despotism over others, enslavement to work, an atrophy of his humanity, and a degeneration into too much abstraction: The woman has a natural tendency, she believes, to "embrace what is living, personal, and whole" because the female corporeal structure of the body is oriented towards supporting the growth of new life within. Yet these tendencies can lead a woman to negative qualities of losing the self in another human being, too much curiosity about others, placing too much emphasis on self, and an inability to accept criticism without seeing it as an attack. She thought that a man had both masculine and feminine qualities in him and that he needed to work on the proper balance.

Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973)

Gabriel and Jacqueline Marcel were plunged into the deep mystery of the overflowing of love from their marriage into the development of a family, when in 1922 they chose to adopt a six-year old boy:

We had been told that he was a timid child, who would perhaps not let himself be known too easily. How moved we were in seeing him run towards us and throw himself into our arms, as though he had truly been waiting for us. This was a moment of grace which I

still keenly feel today. Here adoption took on its full meaning. Were we the ones who were choosing? Were we not rather chosen? (A, 114)

Twenty years later Marcel was invited to teach a course on Fatherhood at Lyons. His journals during his preparation are full of excitement and long thought-out insights into the meaning of fatherhood. "First notes for a course on fatherhood which was requested for Lyons. Fatherhood as Heading—Fatherhood as a value of exaltation: "I am a father!"...Pride...; it is impossible to reduce fatherhood to a biological category, and yet it belongs to the flesh. Adoption is a grafting (*Metaphysical Journal* 1943, in PI, 91)." At the same time, Marcel was well aware of the real dangers facing families— dangers which have been clearly substantiated by the extraordinary international intentional reduction in the number of female babies born in the last years:

The more we tend to make the biological data and considerations predominate, the more we tend to obliterate in man the meaning of fatherhood. In this respect, the progress of biology can represent an appalling danger for man. It is permissible to ask if ignorance in this domain has not been in the past a true blessing: it would for instance be infinitely perilous for man to acquire control over the sex of his descendants (MJ 1943 in PI, 98).

Instead, he enters into the heart of the mystery of fatherhood in his well-known essay entitled: "The Creative Vow as Essence of Fatherhood." After describing the sexual act of the man as akin to a 'nothing' a 'neant' because it is "a gesture [of emptying], which can be performed in almost total unconsciousness," Marcel argues that a man must make a series of repeated acts to become a father who adopts a particular child: "Fatherhood... cannot by any means be restricted to procreation which, humanly speaking, can hardly be considered as an act. It only exists as the carrying out of a responsibility, shouldered and sustained (HV, 116)." It must be fulfilled by a creative vow, which is an "engagement and a decision.... At the root of fatherhood... we can discern something which is analogous to this voeu créateur, and it is by this alone that fatherhood can be considered as a human act (HV, 118)."

Creative fidelity is the form of the commitment of marriage between a husband and wife, and it is the form of commitment of paternity between father and child. In an essay which unfolds the metaphysical structure and dynamics of "Creative Fidelity" Marcel asks how is a person able to make a commitment to another person that extends beyond the moment:

What does it really mean to swear fidelity? and how can such a promise be made? The question cannot be asked without giving rise to an antinomy. The promise in fact is made on the basis of some present inner disposition. However: Can I affirm that the disposition, which I have just at the moment that I commit myself, will not alter later on? (CF, 158).

He answers that the moment of commitment is different from a feeling that may come and go.

"The moment I have committed myself, however, the situation is altered. Someone else has registered my promise and henceforth counts on me. And I know it (CF, 159)." Poignantly, Marcel remarks: "the personality infinitely transcends what we may call its snapshot states (CR 162)". Ultimately, the guarantee for holding sequential acts of creative fidelity in continuity is a bond of absolute fidelity with God, who transcends time, and yet holds us in time.

Saint John Paul II (1920-2005)

In 1994, Saint John Paul II identified the root of the devaluation of fatherhood in culture in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*: "Original sin attempts---to abolish fatherhood, destroying its rays which permeate the created world..."⁵ This destruction of fatherhood in our contemporary world can take various forms including indifference in a culture of absent fathers, to substituting a relation of love between father and son to a power relation of master/slave. Yet, We come from the Father, and we return to the Father. As the Apostolic Letter on the *Third Millennium* reminds

⁵ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 228.

us, we are on "a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, [who has] unconditional love for every human creature..."⁶

Saint John Paul II disagreed with Saint Edith Stein about a man's qualities. He never to my knowledge described a man as feminine. Instead he argued that all acts of a man were masculine, and that all acts of a women were feminine. Further the maturing of a woman's femininity (indeed her genius) was found in her spiritual maternity, namely in welcoming and fostering the growth in those entrusted to her biologically or in other ways. The maturing of a man's masculinity was found in his protecting and providing for the persons or various works he adopts and co-creates with God.

Thus fatherhood participates in the generative activity of Primary Paternity, not so much as a biological energy, but the more it participates in the image and likeness of God in the realm of intellect and will. This is spiritual paternity. When human fatherhood flows from the acts of self-conscious choice and self-determination, and when it participates in genuine acts of self-gift to another in love, it expresses more perfectly the image and likeness of its Creator. The centrality of act to the meaning of fatherhood is the reason why Saint Joseph is considered to be the human father of Jesus. In *Guardian of the Redeemer* we read a reference to St. Augustine: "By reason of their faithful marriage both of them deserve to be called Christ's parents, not only his mother, but also his father, who was a parent in the same way the he was the mother's spouse: in *mind*, not in the flesh."⁷

John Paul II describes the characteristics of a father as including: an altruistic spirit, assumption of responsibilities, capacity for love and sacrifice, daily bearing of life's

⁶ John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, #49

⁷ John Paul II, *Guardian of the Redeemer*, #7 (and note 13)

burdens and difficulties, and a wise caring for the future. These are all practical ways in which continuing acts of fatherhood is worked out.

In his description of the fatherhood of St. Joseph we find these qualities embellished along with the characteristic of the total gift of self in life and work in a hidden guardianship of the Word made flesh. Even St. Joseph is described as discovering the depth of his fatherhood through the events of life. As we find in the document #20 "From the beginning Joseph accepted with the 'obedience of faith' his human fatherhood over Jesus. And thus, following the light of the Holy Spirit who gives himself to human beings through faith, he certainly came to discover every more fully the indescribable gift that was his human fatherhood."⁸

In one crucial experience in the life of St. Joseph we are abruptly returned to the original reflection of our presentation, on the prime paternity of God. Recall the passage from Luke when Jesus was lost from his parents for three days, teaching in the temple. In Scripture we read that his mother Mary said to him: "Son why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously," --- referring to Joseph as his earthly adoptive father, but Jesus answered: "Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house?" ---referring to his Heavenly Father Abba. In this short answer, we are sharply reminded who Jesus' Father is, and who our Father is. We are brought again into the relationship with our Father from whom we came and to whom we are going. We are brought into the mystery of Divine Paternity and its dynamism of love for the Son, Jesus Christ, Word made flesh. Divine Paternity is Primary Paternity, and human paternity is participation in Primary Paternity. To the extent that human

⁸ John Paul II, *Guardian of the Redeemer*, #20.

paternity expresses human acts of choice and knowledge this participation will become more perfect, more fully of love, and holy, and share more of the eternal life of the reign of God.